

Who can tell a working-class story? Examining the representational limits of class in *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) and beyond

Earlier this year, a debate about the film *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) was reignited on social media in response to a [2019 article](#) by journalist Emma Burnell, where she argued that Ken Loach's recent films not only 'preach to the converted', but also 'exclude any audience who would find themselves represented in them.' The ensuing debate about who gets to tell 'authentic' working-class stories - or even who watches them - is emblematic of a common trajectory of broader arguments about social class, which we argue frequently slip into the much narrower framework of 'cultural authenticity.' Commonly, such debates centre around the question of what (or who) counts as working-class, a heightened issue in Britain where unusually [large numbers of people self-identify as such](#) - illustrated most recently by research highlighting the discursive strategies adopted by [middle-class Britons to position themselves as working-class](#). In this blog post we revisit an argument we made in a 2019 article, suggesting that not much has changed in the representational field, or the 'narrative economies' (Gibbs and Lehtonen 2019), within which *I, Daniel Blake* was originally released, as well as explore some of the political consequences of the narrow parameters within which social class tends to be debated.

Released in 2016 to critical acclaim, the film tells the story of Daniel, a white carpenter in his late 50s, signed off work following a major heart attack, focusing on his deteriorating health as he navigates the welfare system. Early on in the film he meets a young single mother of two, Katie, who has recently been [moved to Newcastle by her London council](#). The pair meet at the Jobcentre and go on to become friends - Daniel helps out with odd jobs around Katie's house, and acts as a grandfather figure to her children. The film was released 4 years after the Welfare Reform Act (2012), during an era of intensified representational focus on the lives of benefit claimants. Within a televisual and cinematic landscape that reproduced damaging narratives of dependent and irresponsible 'benefit scroungers' - commonly dubbed '[poverty porn](#)' - Daniel and Katie's stories importantly portrayed precarity as a result of engagements with state welfare processes - rather than as incidental to them.

Following its release, the film has been primarily understood as Daniel's story, and relatedly most frequently interpreted through its representations of class and the financial precarity imposed by state welfare practices. In contrast, we focused our analysis on the film's minor moments and character arcs, asking what kinds of political possibilities the choice of Daniel as protagonist excludes. The film tells many stories alongside that of Daniel's - including Katie's mentioned above, as well as of Daniel's neighbour China, a precariously employed young black man - and we questioned whether its title and emphasis on Daniel might distract from more radical interventions made in these other stories.

While Daniel continues to struggle for recognition and support from the welfare state, both Katie and China find other ways of supplementing their incomes to ensure their survival. China operates a small-scale sneaker smuggling business with his Chinese partner - his name oddly equated with his criminality - and Katie is seen first shoplifting for tampons and deodorant, and then supporting her family through sex work. But Daniel disapproves of China's work, and Katie's engagement in sex work ruptures their relationship after Daniel demands she conform to a more respectable femininity. Despite China's warnings - 'Dan, they'll fuck you around. Make it as miserable as possible. No accident. That's the plan!' - Daniel continues to place his trust in the welfare state. Scribbling 'I Daniel Blake demand my appeal date before I starve' on the wall of the Jobcentre, he eventually sells his possessions to cover his bills and sits alone in his flat, waiting. Daniel's behaviour could be understood through Berlant's (2011) frame of 'cruel optimism': his belief that the welfare state *will* care for him, and his claim to support as an 'ideal' working citizen, reiterated in the final scene of the film, speaks to an investment in a working-class respectability no longer meaningful under conditions of austerity. Moreover, it is a recognition [never extended to many working-class subjects](#) in the first place.

And yet, even Daniel's story could be read as something other than a straightforward narrative of a working-class hero. Daniel is off work for the entirety of the film, yet unrecognised under the WCA (the heavily criticised disability assessment for Employment Support Allowance), and forced to apply for jobs he is too unwell to perform. Daniel's capacity to return to work decreases as a result of these processes, and the harrowing conclusion to his story is representative of the experiences of many who have been found ['fit for work'](#) in similar circumstances.

Halfway through the film, we also learn that for the majority of his adult life Daniel was a primary carer. Although his partner's mental illness is only briefly alluded to, the personal significance of the role appears to motivate the care that he performs for Katie's children. Neither of these factors - his chronic illness, his role as carer - precludes Daniel from working-class identification; nor is the aim here to emphasise disability or care over class in his story. Yet, it is telling that, when [19% of households with a person with disabilities live in poverty](#) and only [46.3% of working-age people with disabilities are in employment](#), Daniel's story has much less readily been taken up as emblematic of the lives of carers or people with disabilities, or debated for its *authenticity* on these grounds. Indeed, Daniel's posthumous words, read by Katie at his funeral, seem to rest entirely on him having 'paid his dues' as a working citizen:

I look my neighbour in the eye, and help him if I can. I don't accept or seek charity. My name is Daniel Blake. I am a man, not a dog. As such I demand you treat me with respect. I Daniel Blake, am a citizen, nothing more, and nothing less.

We, therefore, question whether the film - in positioning the legitimacy of his claim to justice as flowing from his status as a life-long worker and the exceptionality of his current circumstances - risks reifying narratives of 'undeserving' and 'deserving' benefit claimants on which debates over welfare 'reform' rely. At the same time, it is through the stories of disability and illness experienced through state processes and the narratives of reciprocal care and survival that far more radical interventions in the film are made. When taken only as Daniel's story, and only as a working-class story, many diverse aspects of the lives portrayed in the film are lost. Our argument here is not that the film *should have been* about disability, care, Katie's dedicated motherhood, or her and China's strategies of survival - because it already *is* about these things. Rather, we suggest that debates about the authenticity of its representation of working-classness play into discourses about 'truthful' and thus 'deserving' subjects of welfare support on which austerity logics depend.

Burnell is not the first commentator to critique Loach for telling 'inauthentic' working-class stories - in fact, much of the discussion following the film's release, in media commentary and in Parliament, [centred around the question of truthfulness](#). And yet, it remains important to question what such claims to '(in)authentic' working-class storytelling (and spectatorship) politically enable or foreclose. 5 years on from the film's original release, and in the context of Brexit, recession and pandemic-related intensifications of precarity, it remains essential to interrogate these mobilisations within the limited narrative economies of ['post'-austerity Britain](#). Claims to 'authentic' working-class storytelling engender exclusions along [racial and gendered lines, for instance](#) (see: [Bhambra 2017](#)), ultimately limiting the scope for wider recognition of and identification with class politics.

Over the last few years we have seen the continued mobilisation of the 'left behind' and the 'white working class' to either make isolated socio-economic arguments for, or seek to legitimise the place of racism and anti-immigrant sentiment within, Brexit (see: [Virdee and McGeever 2018](#)). Representations of pandemic-related poverty have emphasised the 'exceptional' unfairness of [international students having to use food banks](#) (see: [Bhattacharyya 2020](#)), whilst a discourse of 'hero key workers' has handed out nationalised thank yous in lieu of addressing the [unfair](#) and often [unsurvivable](#) working conditions to which BAME workers have been [disproportionately exposed](#). These framings position poverty and injustice as arising out of one-time exceptional circumstances, thereby diminishing a politics against precarity mobilised through more intersectional and longer-term frames. Arguably, it is the same mobilisation of *exceptionalism*, and of the narrow interpretative field of class-based politics, that is replicated in both the story of *I, Daniel Blake* and the debates over its 'truthfulness.'

Perhaps it is precisely that Daniel's story is one of 'familiar' and 'respectable' working-classness that allows for the rehashing of debates over authenticity in the face of the complex

reality of 2021. Nonetheless, we want to suggest that the important question is not whether Daniel's story of working-classness was truthfully or authentically told (or viewed) - but rather, why the story of class in neoliberal Britain would ever just be his?

References

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Author Biographies:

Jacqueline Gibbs is a Lecturer in Sociology at Middlesex University London, and her work focuses on critical theoretical engagements with the concept of vulnerability.

Aura Lehtonen is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Northampton, and her research explores the limitations and possibilities of sexual politics within austerity and neoliberalism.